

Death by Suburb sermon series
7 – Sabbath: You’re Doing a Timeout!
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What was your parents’ preferred method of punishment? I *know* you remember. When you acted up, how did your parents choose to administer justice? For some it was a good ol’ fashioned spanking. Like the cartoon where the father is about to spank his son and says, “Son, doing this hurts me more than it hurts you.” To which the son replies, “Then let’s spare us both the pain and call it off.”

For others, their punishment was a lecture or grounding. A particularly effective one used against me was no dessert. Leigh still does that from time to time. But nothing would strike fear in my heart like my grandfather’s yardstick. If one of us grandchildren would get out of line, he would simply say, “I’m going to get the yardstick.” Now, that usually was enough to make us cool our jets, but if we continued to goof off, he’d stand up, walk slowly over to the closet, open the door, and pull out the aforementioned instrument of torture. I know it was only a yardstick, but to us little kids it must have looked at least three feet long! He would walk slowly back over to his chair and lay the yardstick across his lap, and peace would once again reign in the kingdom. Now I have to tell you that in a million years my grandfather would have never hit one of us; the point was he never needed to.

Today, corporal punishment is usually frowned upon, so the chosen method of discipline has become the timeout. Had such a thing existed when I was a kid I would have spent more time in timeout than in timein, but it didn’t. Leigh and I used the timeout quite effectively with our older daughter Sydney, but our younger daughter Molly doesn’t quite get the concept. When we say, “If you don’t behave, you’re going to do a timeout!” she says, “Okay!” and runs to her timeout chair. I’m considering buying a yardstick.

Why is the timeout so effective? Here’s the philosophy behind it. To make our children stop their destructive behavior, we take them out of their comfortable area and put them in an isolated place that forces them to slow down, be quiet, stop their activity, and reflect on how they are behaving. The goal is, of course, transformation, a change in behavior.

Now, what if I made this invitation to you? In order to help you put a halt to some of the chaos in life, I would like to invite you to take a break from your daily routine, to find a quiet spot in your house or neighborhood, to turn off all your electronic devices and means of communication, and simply slow down, be still, and reflect on the life God has given you to live. How does a short time away from the demands of your life sound? Folks, we need a timeout.

The Bible has a word for taking a timeout: it’s called the Sabbath. A Sabbath is simply a block of time, usually a 24-hour period, which is set aside for the purpose of rest and relationship-building with God. I think we tend to think of Sabbath as a thoroughly Jewish word. After all, Jews place an emphasis on their Sabbath or Shabbat, which is Saturday. It’s woven into the fabric of their faith. But Christians, with the help of suburban culture, have lost their grip on the meaning and significance of Sabbath.

Of course, the idea of Sabbath originated in the beginning of the Bible at creation, where after six days of work God rested to enjoy what He had made. This time of rest

was so important that he made it one of the Ten Commandments, instructing the Israelites to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. One day of the week is set aside for rest and worship, to allow our land, our workers, and our bodies to recover from the previous six days and rejuvenate for the week ahead.

Part of the reason this tradition has dimmed in Christianity may be Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath. In our story from Matthew he seems to devalue the Sabbath by doing what the overstrict Pharisees considered unlawful. A closer reading shows that Jesus is only bringing a common sense understanding to observing the Sabbath, but the concept of keeping it doesn't seem to carry as much weight with him.

If that reading is true, it certainly has carried over into our modern understanding of the Sabbath. While the Christian Sabbath day of Sunday used to be protected as sacred by Blue Laws and family traditions, our culture has encroached upon that time so egregiously that it's unrealistic to think we'll ever regain Sunday as a holy day on a societal level. Sundays are gone.

But instead of only pointing the finger, we can also point the thumb, because those of us living in the suburbs have contributed to the downfall of the Sabbath. As I've said before, in suburbia we are results-oriented. Our worth is often determined by our productivity, and this spills over into our spirituality. If we're going to take time to be spiritual, we want results.

This causes us to find ways to move faster and be more efficient. There is a pride to our busyness, and it's not the good kind of pride. The demands on us seem too great and the time we have to meet them in seems too short. How often do we say, "I don't have enough time!" or "I wish there was more time in the day"?

Which makes taking a Sabbath seem strange and impractical. There's so much to be done! Who can afford to take a day off from being productive? Who has time to just stop and reflect? We see the Sabbath as laziness, not holiness. We see resting as a sign of weakness, not a divine prerogative. We can't afford to take a day off; that would just make the other six that much more chaotic.

So we ignore the Sabbath. It doesn't fit into our understanding of suburban spirituality. We love the other six days, because that's where we can pursue spiritual progress and accomplishment. We are do-something Christians. And those rare times we do take some form of Sabbath from life, we expect results. I'll force God to bless me by obeying one of his commandments. The schedule-oriented approach to taking the Sabbath is that it will make me more efficient and blessed the other six days.

I've been considering trying to do "No Computer Fridays." On my day off, I would not turn on that infernal device that takes up so much of my time and attention. My wife doesn't think I can do it, and I'm not sure I can, because I would be worried about what I was missing. Could you go a day without your computer, your cell phone, your TV? How does the thought of that make you feel?

Here's the truth, as I see it. We're not too busy, too important, or too needed to take a rest. We're too scared. Too scared to relinquish that bit of control we think we have. Too scared that the world can't go on without us, or even worse, that it can. Too scared that if we "waste" that time, we'll never get it back.

And yet, what are the dangers of *not* doing a timeout? What are the consequences of not resting on regular basis? I think we're living them every day. The United States leads the world in a number of health-related categories, most of them not good. We are

more economically successful, have the fastest pace of life, and have the highest rate of heart attacks and obesity. The unreflective life has its costs.

We claim to be so locked into our schedule that we often feel there isn't a way out of it. We've been conditioned to believe that whatever we do isn't enough, that there's always more to be done, and that time is our most valuable commodity. We spent all kinds of money on time-saving devices to help us make our life more efficient, managed, and controlled, but then we use the time saved to do more work.

And yet, that understanding is a fallacy, because we do have power to change our schedules if it's important enough. Take a funeral, for example. I'm amazed at how drastically people will rearrange their schedules when someone close to them dies. Meetings that used to seem so important are canceled, trips that were top priority get postponed, money that was considered necessary gets spent on airline tickets or flowers.

If we are so willing to let death rearrange our schedule, why are we not willing to give the same power to God? God has asked us to give one day, a day where we rest, enjoy life, and worship him, but we devalue the Sabbath as just another day out of seven.

I know the counterarguments are already forming in your mind. If you're like me, you would make the argument that you take your Sabbath in week-long chunks called "vacations." But are vacations really restful and full of worship? How often do we feel like we need a vacation from our vacations? In most cases a vacation is not equal to a Sabbath. A true Sabbath is not an amenity of the economically privileged. A true Sabbath can be measured by the question, "Could a person in poverty experience this?"

The fact of the matter is that the Sabbath is not going to elbow its way into our lives. We have to make room for it. Maybe taking a whole day isn't realistic. I know one family that takes a Sabbath from sports and activities for one season a year, and uses that time to be together as a family. Maybe there are Sabbath moments to be found in each day, time to turn off the TV or computer, time for rest, reflection, and worship.

In our suburban existence, we have been conditioned to be busy and productive. In order to experience God, we have to fight that tendency. Abraham Heschel wrote, "Six days of the week we seek to dominate the world; on the seventh day, we try to dominate the self." In other words, don't just do something, stand there! Take a timeout from life and remind yourself that you are not in control. You'll have six other days to try keep up with an overbooked schedule. But if we give that one day to God, maybe the other six will be transformed, as well.